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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Rhetoric in Mormon Female Healing Rituals during the Nineteenth Century

A Thesis

By

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Department of English

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of
Master of Science, American Studies

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ABSTRACT

Using the minutes of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, journals and diaries kept by early Mormon women, and letters written about healing blessings, this thesis looks at how nineteenth-century Mormon women used rhetoric in healing rituals to build community, claim power, and comfort one another through illness, death, and birth. Claudia L. Bushman points out that “Mormon women were much like other American women of their day, but their allegiance to the faith led them in some new directions.” Instead of retreating to acceptable standards of femininity, Mormon women claimed and used godly power and authority.

The women who offered healing blessings believed they held the power of God and demonstrated that connection through healing rhetoric. In several recorded blessings, women used strong opposing forces that mirror Biblical miracles such as life and death, blind and sight, and near death to complete health, to show the power of healing. Unity was important to many new religious and spiritual movements; the healers’ rhetoric makes this clear. Tricotomous tendencies were well ingrained within the structure of narrative and belief: often three women participated in the healing ritual and used the rhetoric of three (such as having three women involved in blessing, or being healed the third time someone visits to give a healing blessing) to claim healing power. Sometimes the women giving the blessing asked for healing and other times they rebuked disease. Analysis of healing rhetoric illuminates the religious and cultural experience of these women during a time of transition in Mormonism and in American culture, showing that Mormon women were, at least in part, able to claim power over their own spiritual and medical needs.

By understanding the similarities and differences in female healing blessings I gained insight into the oral tradition of their healing experiences as well as cultural rhetoric that was important to those who used their power to heal and be healed.

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Rhetoric in Mormon Female Healing Rituals during the Nineteenth Century

Wash and anoint the sick, beneath your hands,

Those not to death appointed, shall revive;

Let no man say you nay, what God commands,

The pure and humble spirit understands,

And through it oft, the dead are made alive.

Author, Louisa Lula Greene Richards (1889)

In this thesis I explore how women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or, the Mormons, practiced faith healing from 1842 until the turn of the twentieth century. Faith healing rituals were a natural offshoot of the beginnings of Mormon belief. Its founder, Joseph Smith, specifically promoted the role of women as faith healers. After Smith's death, women continued healing rituals openly and were, for the most part, supported by their male counterparts through the early 1900s. Documents show that throughout the beginning of the Mormon Church women expressed differing ideas about whether or not they held the priesthood. In the early twentieth century women began to question and ask for permission from church leadership to give healing blessings. Gradually permission was no longer granted. By the 1940s it died out as a practice.

I look closely at twelve recorded faith healing rituals performed by Mormon women from the beginning of the Mormon Church through the early twentieth century. The rhetorics of these healing rituals show how women built community, claimed power, and gave comfort to one another. Women needed rhetorics of community, power, and

comfort throughout the nineteenth century and drew from the rhetoric of patriarchal church language as well as from personal female experience.

For primary sources, I use letters, stories, and journals from Martha Sonntag Bradley and Mary Brown Firmage Woodward's *4 Zins: A Story of Mothers and Daughters on the Mormon Frontier*, Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr's book *Women's Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints*, and Claudia Bushman's *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah*. Each of these books gives an anthology of women's stories from early Mormonism. I take from them individual moments of healing ritual and address the rhetoric used to legitimize the practice of healing. Additionally, I look at documents from editors Kate Holbrook and Matt Grow, of the Church Historian's Press, who recently released the collection *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History*, cataloging notes from the earliest meetings of the Female Relief Society

Jonathan Stapley and Kristine Wright have written the most comprehensive work on Mormon women's faith healing thus far. Their work "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism" is invaluable in looking at the history of women's ritual work and as a compass for further studies. Because their published work focuses on the liturgical ramifications of folk ritual versus formal ritual, they have not critically examined the rhetoric involved in healing rituals performed by women. I add to their work by closely examining the language of healing rituals and the power that women claimed through the use of language. Because current scholarship on Mormon women healers has focused on whether or not the stories are historically significant or indicative of how women's healing should be handled in the Mormon Church today, my study redirects attention to

another important issue: what the language used to describe the rituals and their effects reveal about women's networks, power, and need for healing. In the conclusion, I explore what changed in the early twentieth century that put an end to women's faith healing—specifically how pressures from the medical establishment as well as the church caused this practice to fall into disuse. Although leaders in the Mormon Church acknowledge that women gave healing blessings throughout the early years of the church, they have not traditionally acknowledged that women held priesthood authority, a question that can be supported on either side. These questions, debated openly by scholars, are currently not well known by most members of the Mormon Church. This paper moves past the “did they or did they not hold the priesthood or give blessings?” issue to look at how Mormon women used rhetoric to maintain their identity as religious healers. Rhetorical studies help scholars understand how words and actions reflected meaning for the people using them in specific cultural and historical contexts. By studying the rhetorics of healing we can gain an understanding of how women built community, maintained power, and comforted one another through the life and death situations that were consistently present during the nineteenth century. If women hope to regain the power to heal they once had, and if historians hope to understand nineteenth-century Mormon women, they need to understand how those women used healing rhetoric.

I have retained original spelling, punctuation, and grammar for all quotations.

Background

Women needed rhetorics of healing, in part, because the rise of professional medicine caused problems within female communities that previously dealt with birth,

life, and death communally. Throughout the nineteenth century, professional medical communities were growing and trying to establish a sense of importance in the United States. By categorizing women as “the other,” physicians were able to claim that women had special problems that needed to be medically solved. “The nineteenth century medical discourses present a highly charged field that reflects the gender and power relations in American society” (Spengler 35). These discourses took power from women and differentiated them as imperfect and lesser than male counterparts. Several religions that began during the early nineteenth century seem to balance this loss of physical power by giving women spiritual power that most women did not claim before the mid-nineteenth century.

Along with the medical enlightenment, new religions were quickly formed and molded during the second great religious awakening through the end of the century. In the northern states, specifically the New England area, there was a tumultuous upheaval of religious questioning. For women, much of the questioning came from needing a new understanding of what happened to their children when they died. Women faced heartache from the illness and death of many loved ones. Healing blessings gave, at the very least, hope of heavenly help for those who were suffering. Rhetoric, medical science, and religion often overlapped and collided. Female religious leaders from several new faith traditions also took up the rhetoric of healing. One example comes from Mary Baker Eddy, leader of the Christian Science religious movement. She “believed that disease and other human ills are the result of human alienation from God rather than inherent in creation” (McDonald 93). Like Christian Scientists, Mormon women believed that healing power came from God and could solve scientific medical issues.

Religion taught that childbirth was difficult because of Eve's essential sin. Feminist poet Adrienne Rich points out that "In Judeo-Christian theology, woman's pain in childbirth is punishment from God, since the curse of Eve in Genesis was taken literally well into the nineteenth-century" (128). While Mormonism, by contrast, looks at Eve's choice as a heroic act, the new doctrine does not change the idea that women in the Mormon Church carried the consequence of painful child birth because of Eve's transgression. In the larger nineteenth-century context, a woman's body was seen by many as evil and tempting, but also weak and feeble. Medical practitioners used burgeoning science to explain the differences between the sexes and women often found "themselves in a new position of dependency on the male medical profession—with no alternative sources of information or counsel" (Ehrenreich and English 25). Dependence on medical explanations took powerful rhetoric away from women when talking about themselves and their bodies. The Mormon Church gave some of this powerful rhetoric back to women in the form of spiritual healing power.

In some instances, women turned to new religions in the nineteenth century that offered them spiritual and physical forms of power they couldn't acceptably access before the Second Awakening. Accounts suggest that by 1840, nearly five out of every eight converts to the Mormon Church were women (Bartholomew). Mormonism, in particular, granted women the power to lay hands on those who were sick or close to childbirth and call down the power of God to bestow healing blessings. It is important to address the rhetoric of healing blessings that women claimed both before and after they were offered religious power by male leadership because the rhetoric, both shared and differentiated by gender, gives context to beliefs and traditions found in early

Mormonism. I will address the language, both verbal and nonverbal, used by women in healing blessings in order to look at how rhetoric was used to give and receive power and how it was used to bless those who were vulnerable.

Situations that require healing power show rhetoric at an intimate level because the healing ritual wasn't necessarily meant for public consumption, but it was shared within these tight knit communities. Feminist scholars Carol Spitzack and Katherine Carter point out that "rhetoric can be studied—not by asking if [women] say anything important, or if there are any great speakers, but by asking what women say, how women use the public platform, how women speak" (407). By looking at healing, we gain insight into both the public and private rhetoric of Mormon women's lives. These public and private moments happened both before Mormon women were called by prophetic direction and afterwards. They shared stories of hearing angels telling them to bless and how to bless the sick. By the time it came through prophetic command it was not shocking; in fact, it probably felt natural because it was already happening.

Self-Authorized Blessings

Women in various spiritual traditions gave blessings for healing. Mormon women began giving healing blessings before they were given sanction from Mormon prophets and apostles; in other words, women's blessings were recorded before written liturgical direction was given by Joseph Smith. It is significant to recognize that women were feeling, hearing, and sensing the supernatural language of God because they needed it, not because it was given to them by men.

Women's stories about healing intertwine with stories of child birth and deaths of loved ones. The records of women, childbirth, death, and spiritual awakening are numerous. Folklorist, David Hufford discusses why people need shared language and experience in order to easily discuss things of life and spirit. He explains, "Not only does general knowledge allow for convenient language, but the presence of convenient language indicates the presence of a consensus, which in most cases provides assurance that one's experience is not somehow monstrous" (52). Convenient or often used language gave women a shared and powerful spiritual language in order to comprehend and discuss their personal and collective experiences. Women used rhetoric to explain spiritual experiences, share insights about life and death, and to warn and teach each other about the health situations of children and loved ones. Sociologist Susan Starr Sered points out that "involvement in religions which offer meaningful interpretations of child death (and techniques for avoiding deaths of other children) provides more than emotional support or compensation; it provides expertise in reassessing and coming to terms with the existential 'meaning of life'" (19). The "meaning of life" was important during a time when life and death seemed arbitrary and families continually paid the high price of heartache. Women needed rhetorics of healing to help them grasp their embodied experiences.

Before Joseph Smith became the prophet of Mormonism he understood that women had and used spiritual gifts. "Lucy Mack Smith's [Joseph Smith's mother] biography of Joseph indicates that the family had been visionary over several generations, long before Joseph's first vision" (Bushman 3). Spiritual gifts, like visions and healing, were not necessarily gender specific. The King James Version of the Bible

was accessible by women in the New England area by the late eighteenth century. As shown in several accounts, people understood the Bible enough to begin looking for experiences spoken of. One passage that is quoted by several people who write about healing during the early nineteenth century is from Mark 16: 17-18, “And these signs shall follow them that believe...they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” In 1838, four years before Smith formally gave healing power to the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Lucy Mack Smith blessed Mary Isabella Horne’s daughter. Horne, who later would organize the Ladies’ General Retrenchment Society, gave an account that her daughter “had taken very ill, and her life despaired of, in fact it seemed impossible for her to get better. The mother of the Prophet, Mrs. Lucy Smith, came and blessed the child and said she should live. This was something new in that age for a woman to administer to the sick” (A Representative Woman: Mary Isabella Horne). Although this concept was new to Horne, it had been practiced by the Smiths for generations. Other accounts show that by 1838, clearly before Joseph Smith granted the right for women to give blessings, Mormon women in England were participating in anointing the sick and participating in ritual healing blessings (Fielding).

The rhetoric of the Horne blessing shows the significance of extreme contrasts in proclaiming miracles. Her daughter was not just ill, but close to death. Accounts of miracles in the Bible often show strongly opposing forces: dead and alive, near dead and healed, blind and sight, grievous sin and total forgiveness. The rhetoric of miracles does not often take into account someone who is feeling a little under-the-weather, says a prayer, and then feels mostly okay. It is important to remember that rhetoric is involved

in the healing process and that these stark contrasts are recorded while other types of healing may not be represented. This idea will be further explored later in the paper.

The Smith family saw visions and blessings as a normal part of both male and female life and others followed their example. Women who were healers later in the nineteenth century still understood the difference between being called by God to heal and official direction from church leadership. Early Mormon women, like Patty Sessions, felt authorized to give healing blessings based on personal feelings and revelation. Sessions, a midwife who immigrated from Nauvoo to Utah with the Mormons, shared a journal entry on July 16, 1884 explaining a time when she was called to bless an unidentified woman without being asked.

I felt as though I must lay hands on her. I never felt so before without being called upon to do it. She said ‘Well, do it.’ I knew I had been ordained to lay hands on the sick and set apart to do that. She had been washed clean and I anointed her, gave her some oil to take, and then laid hands on her. I told her she would get well if she would believe and not doubt it. (Smart 362)

The result of the blessings was not shared in the journal entry potentially showing that sometimes the blessing was as important as the result.

The language involved in these healing accounts is strongly tied to biblical ideas of what believers should be able to do. By using healing as a religious ritual women came together in communities of support. Mormon Church historian Richard Birdsall explains that “while [religious] revival was born out of individual needs not comprehended in Enlightenment philosophy, it also had a decidedly social dimension. The social aspect began to develop when each individual discovered others with similar hopes and fears”

(356). There is significant rhetorical importance of using healing blessings to build community. Healing was needed and by sharing these blessings with each other women found comfort.

Women's Blessings with Prophetic Approval

During the Victorian era, women were discouraged from speaking publically and therefore had to use their domestic language persuasively with both men and women. In the larger society, public women were often vilified by male preachers, politicians, businessmen, and practitioners. Women, as the subordinate group, had to attain fluency in both dominant and subordinate language use. American Studies scholar June Hadden Hobbs explains that “women are a ‘muted’ group who must use the language of the dominant group to be taken seriously” (122). Scholars note that this duality of language understanding happens in many cultural contexts where one group is submissive to a dominant group. Mormon women were given a stronger public voice than in wider societal context. Their prophet Joseph Smith softened this Victorian idea of women’s rhetoric as he assisted in setting up the Nauvoo Female Relief Society. While the Relief Society maintained the separate spheres of male and female, it also allowed women to use and gain skills that might have seemed radical in the nineteenth century.

Joseph Smith organized the Nauvoo Female Relief society On March 17, 1842. His first wife Emma Smith was appointed to be the president. Joseph Smith declared that this organization was meant to be a kingdom of priests and handed the proverbial keys of that power to Emma Smith and her councilors. The rhetoric of priesthood empowered women as healers from the beginning of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo. “Women

sometimes administered to the sick in formal settings as part of their regular Relief Society meetings” (Stapley and Wright 6). Joseph Smith reiterated that women were correct in using healing power this way a month later on April 28, 1842. The Relief Society minutes recorded by Eliza R. Snow share Joseph Smith’s instructions on the matter:

Pres. Smith continued the subject by adverting to the commission given to the ancient apostles “Go ye into all the world” &c.— no matter who believeth; these signs, such as healing the sick, casting out devils &c. should follow all that believe whether male or female. He ask’d the Society if they could not see by this sweeping stroke, that wherein they are ordaind, it is the privilege of those set apart to administer in that authority which is confer’d on them—and if the sisters should have faith to heal the sick, let all hold their tongues, and let everything roll on... Respecting the female laying on hands, he further remark’d, there could be no evil in it if God gave his sanction by healing— that there could be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the face with water— that it is no sin for any body to do it that has faith, or if the sick has faith to be heal’d by the administration (36)... This Society is to get instruction thro’ the order which God has established— thro’ the medium of those appointed to lead— and I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time— this is the beginning of better days, to this Society (40).... Prest. S. then offered instruction respecting the propriety of females administering to the sick by the — said it was according to revelation (41).

When women recorded these events they recalled being given the power of healing by the prophet. Joseph Smith wanted saints to have a charismatic and restorative power along with rituals designed to assist with the work (Stapley and Wright 6). Relief Society sisters used this authority to bless, heal, and teach one another through the beginning of the twentieth century.

After the death of Joseph Smith the new Mormon prophet Brigham Young reiterated at a general conference for the church on November 14, 1869 that women should use this strong healing rhetoric. The Mormons had moved to Utah and Young still expected women to use the power of healing. He said, “Why do you not live so as to rebuke disease: ...it is the privilege of a mother to have faith and to administer to her child; this she can do herself, as well as sending for the elders” (Young).

Young emphasized the healing power of mothers. In the American context motherhood was still seen as the door to femininity but women who did not have children also participated in healing rituals. Many women began to see the value in being educated because educated women could better teach their children to be good members of the republic. These leaders allowed women a powerful language to use in their families and at the time they also needed more hands to do the work of building what they believed to Zion. However, the power to give healing blessings was not just for mothers. Women were encouraged to use their spiritual power to bless all those who were in need.

Access to Greater Spiritual Power

Several scholars point out that nineteenth-century society believed that women, being the weaker vessel, were ideal for the spirit or the dead to overtake and use (Bann, Braude, Bushman, Newell, Stapley and Wright). It was not rare for either men or women to testify that women had greater access to spiritual power. On April 19, 1842, Sister Durfey was blessed by Emma Smith, Sarah Cleaveland and Elizabeth Whitney, the presidency of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo. “Mrs. [Elizabeth Davis] Durfey bore testimony to the great blessing she received when administered to, after the close of the last meeting, by Pres E. Smith & Councillors Cleveland and Whitney. Sister Durfey said ‘she never realized more benefit thro’ any administration— that she was heal’d, and thought the sisters had more faith than the brethren” (April 19, 1842, Meeting notes from the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo 31). Durfey was not saying anything that would have surprised either men or women of the time period, but her testimony did reify the idea that women were thought to be better vessels of faith and spirit.

The popular idea of women being the weaker sex meant that they had a special openness to both the Holy Spirit and those who had already died. Women were often uncomfortable claiming power for themselves, but used spiritual rhetoric more easily if they were beset by spirits or unseen godly power. This was not only true in the Mormon tradition but in several other “female-friendly” nineteenth-century religions such as Spiritualism, Christian Science, and Shakerism. In these traditions women held positions as healers in the practice of medicine as spiritual healers. Historian Ann Braude explains that many Spiritualists also asserted, “women were better suited than men to act as healers” and “could cure the diseases of the physical body just as it healed rents in the

social fabric and cured the rifts between the living and the dead” (145). This general belief gave women a chance to use spiritual rhetoric in a way previously denied.

Unity, Hands, and Touch

Touch had specific rhetorical power during the nineteenth century. Electricity and magnetism were new scientific movements, and religious belief often used science to explain what was happening spiritually. The idea of energy being passed from one person to another, including spiritual energy, was prevalent. Spiritual energy was more easily passed through touch by those who were united in purpose. Unity was also shown by women who stood or sat in a circle. In a letter to Apostle George A. Smith, on April 19, 1851, Lucy Meserve Smith, his second wife, wrote about an experience she had with several wives from her household. Lucy recounts that

Bathsheba said when she and Zina and Hannah and I layed our hands on her [Sarah Ann Libby Smith] she felt as though she was praying over an infant we prayed with our right hand uplifted to the most high and we all felt the blessing of the holy spirit. Zina said there was a union of faith.” (Lucy Smith)

This union of faith mentioned by Lucy Smith was an important component in successful spirituality in several burgeoning religions of the nineteenth century. Bathsheba, via Lucy’s letter, used an infant to symbolize the tenderness, love, and unity felt by the group. Caring for children and infants was easily understood by plural wives and friends who participated in these blessings. Three women were able to use their hands to heal as they were united in faith, marriage, and power.

This blessing also highlights the importance of hands. In most records, hands and touch were used to be on bodies and heads. In this account, each woman had her left hand laid on the person receiving the blessing and her right hand “upraised to the most high.” Accounts of women touching with both hands and accounts where they had one hand on the sick and the other raised show the rhetorical power of hands and energy transfer. It is still common for Mormons to use the raising of the right hand and blessing circles symbolically to show unity.

The use of hands was important in both Mormon healing and Spiritualist séances, but not always for the same reasons. Each movement demanded that peace, unity, and reverence were of utmost importance when calling upon the blessing of heaven or disembodied spirits of loved ones. Spiritualists joined hands when speaking with those beyond this world in unity. “While sitters joined hands around the table, both as a measure against potential fraud and as a means of unifying them as a physically and emotionally connected as a whole, ghostly hands lifted objects, played instruments, walked around the room and interacted with various sitters” (Bann 669). Mormons used the laying on of hands in order to invoke healing power. According to journalist Edward W. Tullidge Mormon women were high priestesses. “The constitution of the Church acknowledged her divine mission...as high priestess she blessed with the laying on of hands!” (Tullidge n.p.). Women of faith began to understand their powers and use their hands to bless and heal the people around them. In the journals of Dr. Rachel Emma Woolley Simmons from May 19, 1883, she records

I went to see Mary Whitney, She is suffering much with a bad leg since her confinement. I am her doctor. She wanted me to anoint her leg and administer to

her and she knew it would be better, so I did as she required, and the Lord heard my prayers and blessed the anointing. I called the next Tuesday, she said it had been getting better ever since. She asked me to administer to her again. I did so and when I called on Friday I found her so much better I will not have to go again for awhile. (Simmons)

Rachel Simmons might have been called as a doctor but what her patient wanted was spiritual healing. She expected her doctor to be able to perform spiritual healing as well as take care of her medical needs. In this example Dr. Simmons uses her hands to anoint her patient's leg. It is a less common example of muted rhetoric when it comes to miraculous healing as often the rhetoric leans toward more extreme contrasts when healing occurs. It is important to note that the story includes three encounters. First, Whitney was sick and needed anointing. The second time she was a little better but needed to be anointed again. By the third encounter she was better and did not need healing administered because by the third time she was visited by Dr. Simmons she was well.

Extreme Healing

Examples of extreme healing are prominent in the Bible, especially surrounding the stories of Jesus. The greatest example is Jesus' return from death through resurrection (Matthew 27:53). Jesus also healed others with extreme examples of divine healing. Jesus brought Lazarus back to life (John 11: 43), he healed the lepers (Luke 17:14), and a woman who touched the edge of his cloak was healed after suffering through twelve years of bleeding (Luke 8:43). Jairus's daughter was very ill, to the point that many

thought she was dead, and Jesus healed her and told her family to feed her (Mark 5: 41-43). Mormon women would have known these stories and would understand the power of healing through these examples. The miracles of extreme healing were recorded as Mormon women shared stories of giving healing blessings to one another.

When Abigail Leonard was 82 years old she shared the following account (remembering an event from 1844) in an interview by Tullidge who was asked to write a book about the power of Mormon women as an explanation to people living in the eastern United States.

The sisters came, washed, anointed, and administered to her [a sick immigrant from England]. The patient's extremities were cold, her eyes set, a spot in the back apparently mortified, and every indication that death was upon her. But before the sisters had ceased to administer, the blood went coursing through her system, and to her extremities, and she was sensibly better. Before night her appetite returned, and became almost insatiable...In three days she sat up and had her hair combed, and soon recovered. (Tullidge 169)

Leonard describes the sick woman as being nearly dead. In sharing a miraculous healing story, it seems important to her to show the power of the healing ritual by giving a vivid description of the poor condition of the recipient. In other words, a healing blessing is powerful because it solved a near-death situation. As the sisters administered the ritual, the sick woman began to recover before they had finished. The immediacy stands as rhetorical proof that the healing blessing was the reason healing began, not an unknown medical reason.

Recovery is shown as an insatiable hunger possibly because hunger is a universally understood condition. When hunger is not present it is a sign of illness. In this retelling, all signs point to imminent death. The convert's eyes were dead and rolled back, her body mortified, and her extremities were cold. The blessing was shown as an example of healing by the immediate warmth of blood coursing through her body. Leonard again shares the power of the healing blessing with immediacy and powerfully emotion. The length of recovery is three days. Three is a significant folk number and would be used subconsciously as proof of power.

The unity of the women working together is of prime importance because it is easier for sharing participants to understand the rhetorical use of language in close familiar relationships due to shared experience and background. Women passed knowledge and experience about health needs and remedies orally from mother to daughter, neighbor to neighbor, in families and close social circles. They would have understood the ambiguous nature of health and healing. Women showed power and unity as they blessed the English convert and they understand one another without a lot of extra explanation.

Power of Three

As in the example of Abigail Leonard, the number three is very important in women's healing rituals. The number three is rhetorically significant in European based Judeo-Christian belief systems. In the Bible the number three is used repeatedly to signify holiness. Surrounding the story of Jesus alone, the number three replays in several ways. Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane, after his crucifixion darkness covered the land for three hours and he was resurrected after three days. In Mormonism the number three

was also used in rhetoric. Joseph Smith specifically talked about three Nephites who roam the earth as resurrected beings, established three orders of the priesthood, and used three witnesses to testify that the Book of Mormon was of God. Smith also taught that there were three kingdoms in heaven. This rhetoric of three was important so it is no wonder that the rhetoric of three was incorporated into worship and blessings throughout the nineteenth century. The presence of three is seen in women's healing blessings throughout this paper. It took three days for the English immigrant to heal, three women join to bless another, even the three step processes of anointing, blessing, and sealing or washing, anointing, and blessing, share the powerful rhetoric of three.

A union of faith can be shown in the idea that the number three cannot be divided; it is "therefore like the gods, immortal, perfect, sacred" (Lease 71). The number three is symbolic of the power of life in triplets, such as: sun, moon, stars; birth, life, death; and land, sky, water. These tricotomous tendencies run throughout western history, and it is no surprise to find women fashioning healing blessings after the number of the godhead and salvation beliefs. Taking an example from Christ in the New Testament, Mormon women healed by using the power of three.

Rhetorically Powerful Language

Throughout the Victorian era men and women were not always allowed to use the same types of language in the public arena. Feminist historian Lindal Buchanan points out that women's "rhetorical delivery inevitably provoked questions concerning the adequacy of their domestic performance. The specter of home and family always accompanied the maternal rhetor...but was not a regular component of delivery for

paternal rhetors” (Buchanan 53). Other scholars agree that women were held to a different standard as they spoke publicly and often even privately (Heller; C. Hobbs; J. H. Hobbs; Taves). One way nineteenth-century Mormon women were able to minimize this distinction was by claiming authority from God.

Women claimed authority as they used powerful language in the following blessing. Elmina A. Shepard Taylor, the first general president of the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association, recorded in her journal in December of 1879 that she was “quite debilitated and sick from the effect of my heart. Sisters Eliza Horne, Margaret Young, and B. Smith laid their hands upon me and rebuked the disease and I was much improved from that very time” (Taylor 16). Taylor records this blessing using the word “rebuke,” which is a powerful word. The women giving the blessing did not ask, they commanded. Three women, united in blessing, are able to “rebuke” the illness and heal Taylor.

Unlike the previous entry, this blessing did not use washing and anointing before the blessing. Besides the word “rebuke” the description of Taylor’s condition was distant and detached from strong emotion (possibly due to Taylor describing herself modestly instead of someone else describing her condition). While power is not shown by equal negative and positive experiences, it still shows that she went from sick to healthy as a direct and immediate result of a healing blessing and the “rebuke” by the women.

Washing, Anointing, and Blessing or Sealing

Washing, anointing, and blessing were separate steps in the healing ordinance. An ordinance is a physical act that signifies something spiritual. Currently the Mormon Church claims that ordinances can only be done through using the priesthood. Water was

known for its healing properties and science supported the need for cleanliness. These healing accounts of anointing indicate that anointing was most often be done by placing blessed oil on the separate body parts in need of healing and often be given internally (Stapley and Wright 17). The blessing was unscripted prayer, while sealing was a formal ending to the anointing. Both the blessing and/or the sealing were usually performed with hands placed on the head of the person in need.

In 1849, Eliza Jane Merrick, an English convert to the Mormon Church, describes using anointing oil to heal her sister:

I anointed her chest with oil...and also gave her some inwardly...She continued very ill all the evening: her breath very short, and fever very high. I again anointed her chest in the name of the Lord, and asked his blessing; he was graciously pleased to hear me, and in the course of twenty-four hours, she was as well as if nothing had been the matter (Merrick 205).

Consecrated, or blessed, oil was used to anoint and seal many blessings given by women. At times some was administered inwardly but it was also used either directly on the afflicted body part or on the head in a sealing ordinance. Unlike the female blessing that rebuked the illness, Merrick asked politely for a blessing.

There are also several instances where oil was not mentioned as part of the washing and anointing process. It is possible that the narrator would assume that the reader would already know that anointing was done with oil. On March 2, 1876, Mary Ann Freeze recorded in her diary that

They had washed Sister Young preparatory to having her annointed which ordanance I attended to after we had prayers, Sister Lawson being mouth made an

excellent and humble prayer. Then I called Sopha to seal the anointing, which she did in a praiseworthy manner, for one so young. Then I called upon Jane to anoint the head of Sister Wickens and Sister Newsom to administer to her. They both did exceedingly well, I will here mention that we all laid our hands on when each one was administered to. Then it was proposed to bless Sister Louie Felt, she being poorly. Sister Cushing anointed and Sister Lawson blessed her. After we were through with these, Sister Aggie Tuckett who is very sick sent word for us to come and pray for her. We went in and Lizzie Felt anointed, and, I administered to her. Felt, that they would all soon be healed They were so grateful to us, seemed to look upon us as ministering angels.” (Freeze)

This blessing shows a number of important rhetorics working with the washing, anointing, and blessing. Women passed these histories using oral rhetoric from one generation to the next. As Freeze asks Sopha to seal the anointing, she praises her for understanding the process at an early age. Freeze not only shows that Sopha has been taught how to seal an anointing she gave her an opportunity to practice in front of a small group of women where Sopha would be safe to do it on her own. There is also a leadership role taken by Freeze. Freeze uses power language such as “I called upon Jane” and because she took leadership of the group people were willing to follow her. Women could “call upon” or “rebuke” in settings of healing.

Washing and anointing was used less than blessings. On December 1, 1879 Sister Taylor was asked to assist in giving a healing blessing to Sister Hardy.

By invitation [I] accompanied Sister Horne up to sister Clara M. Cannon’s and there met Sister Percindia Kimball, to wash and anoint Sister Hardy who lies very low with

consumption. It was the first time I ever saw the ordinance administered and I felt blessed in being thus privileged. The spirit of the Lord was there. (Taylor)

Taylor calls this healing event an ordinance, thus giving it a powerful context inside the Mormon religion. An ordinance was only done by people who had authority given to them by leadership while blessings could be given by anyone who felt called by God to do so. This healing blessing is also given by three people who perform the blessing and one who is watching. It not only calls on the power of three, but also on the power of witness. A witness would give people a reason to believe the person who gave the blessing.

Taylor does not share either the success or lack of success of the healing and that lack turns the story from the person who was being healed to the people who were involved in healing. The ritual of healing was as important to those who were healers and witnesses as it was to those who were healed.

Motherhood and the Rhetoric of Blessings

When addressing women's healing it is important to understand the role of motherhood in both the medical and healing rhetorics. The early nineteenth century was a time of great religious upheaval and women were looking for new answers because their hold over life and death felt ethereal, at best. Child birth and rearing was an especially precarious process. "At a time when one in every two babies died, women were sorely in need of solace, the promise of salvation and a better world beyond" (Goldsmith 13). Mortality was high for both mothers and children. Women lost not only children, but also many women lost husbands and fathers as well during the antebellum period. Sered

discusses the effects of these family conditions throughout the nineteenth century pointing out that “miscarriage and neonatal death physically affect the mother in identifiable ways. Especially during the first year of life, the psychological boundaries between the mother and child overlap. In addition, in many cultures, when a child dies the mother is blamed for angering the spirits or not taking adequate care of the child” (6). Women were especially looking for new rhetoric as a challenge to Calvinist beliefs that if children died before they were baptized they were going to hell.

Several recorded examples reveal the possibility that the outcome of healing rituals may have been secondary to the ability for women to bless. In the journals of Patty Sessions, a Mormon midwife who traveled from Nauvoo to Utah with the Latter-day saints, she records on August 18, 1855 that she “anoints and lays hands” on a baby who was struggling to breathe. By August 20, 1855 the baby “breathed its last [and] we buried in the cemetary [sic]” (Smart 219). Several religions beginning in the second awakening had more hopeful outlooks on what happened after death than the Calvinist religions that preceded them. Heaven was readily available to more than just a few chosen people and children were welcomed to an afterlife that was better than life on earth.

In that light we can look at the specificity of the rhetoric recorded in the Oakley Idaho Second Ward Relief Society Minutes. This pre-confinement blessing ceremony was written down sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century and was used regularly before recording it. Women took the time to bless other women who were getting ready to go through the child birth process, and acknowledge the child she was about to have. The blessing shows an understanding of what new motherhood looked and felt like. While men could have offered a blessing of health this blessing is special

because it shows empathy and specificity that generally could have only come from other women. It focused on women's physical, emotional, and spiritual health, including specific health needs of the entire body.

We anoint you[r] back, your spinal column that you might be strong and healthy no disease fasten upon it no accident befall [befall] you, Your kidneys that they might be active and healthy and perform their proper functions, your bladder that it might be strong and protected from accident, your Hips that your system might relax and give way for the birth of your child, your sides that you[r] liver, your lungs, and spleen that they might be strong and perform their proper functions...your breasts that your milk may come freely and you need not be afflicted with sore nipples as many are, your heart that it might be comforted (Newell 37).

This anointing was done with the healing hands on bodies but it does not specify which areas of the body were touched. Women healers show a strong understanding of anatomy and systems that would be affected during the birth and postnatally. The blessing continues:

when [its] full time shall have come that the child shall present right for birth and that the afterbirth shall come at its proper time...We anoint...your thighs that they might be healthy and strong that you might be exempt from cramps and from the bursting of veins...That you might stand upon the earth and go in and out of the temple of God (Newell 37).

The second section seems to bless the unborn child as well as continue anointing the mother. It also comes with instruction on how to live after recovery from childbirth. In

another strong rhetorical triad this blessing gives instruction to the person being blessed, acknowledges that the child is a separate person, and heals the mother previous to her birthing process. The last step is to seal, or affirm, the blessing to help the anointing take effect. The women finished the ordinance by sealing the blessing:

We unitedly lay our hands upon you to seal this washing and anointing where with you have been washed and anointed for your safe delivery for the salvation of you and your child and we ask God to let his special blessings to rest upon you, that you might sleep well at night that your dreams might be pleasant and that the good spirit might guard and protect you from every evil influence, spirit, and power that you may go your full time and that every blessing that we have asked God to confer upon you and your offspring may be literally fulfilled that all fear and dread may be taken from you and that you might trust in God. All these blessings we united seal upon you in the name of Jesus Christ Amen (Newell 38).

Those giving the blessing show unity in this final step. As we have seen throughout, women would seal the previous blessings by placing hands on the head of the woman being blessed. This follows the pattern of blessings although it does not give insight into what the washing ceremony looks like.

Women offering the ordinance did all three steps of washing, anointing, and sealing. As the sealing calls for sleeping well and guardianship of “the good spirit” the woman being blessed could rest assured that this female-to-female rhetoric was possible. The women giving the blessing wouldn’t have thought to include these peaceful moments before childbirth if they had not understood this need or experienced the possibility. In this way they were not necessarily asking for a miracle, but for the best possible outcome.

The comfort of this type of strength is only possible coming from a community sharing a female to female blessing structure. Mormon temple dedications in the same time period also show this type of specificity but the dedications were always done by male leaders. Shared experiences of women gave them the understanding and power to bless bodies similar to how men blessed buildings.

Conclusion

The rhetoric of healing came in formal power granted by leadership and informal power granted by God. Mormon women capably used the healing power throughout the nineteenth century because they were in a church that was already radical, already iconoclastic. Women gained access to education and writing and they grew in their ability to use and produce effective rhetorical language. The way they blessed one another worked within the boundaries imposed on them by American society, but with a freedom that came from having support of people they viewed as prophets.

Those who offered the blessings understood they were using the power of God and demonstrated that connection through the use of rhetorics of power. In recording the blessings, women used strong opposing forces to show the power of healing. Unity was important to many new religious and spiritual movements and the power of three was well ingrained within the structure of narrative and belief. Often three women participated in the healing ritual and used the rhetoric of three to claim healing power. Sometimes the women giving the blessing asked for healing and other times they rebuked disease. As readers we are able to understand the rhetoric of healing because these recorded accounts used extremes to elicit our understanding of the miracles of giving and

receiving healing blessings. Mormon women used these healing rituals to build community, claim power, and give comfort to one another throughout the nineteenth century.

Epilogue

As the Mormon Church moved through the early twentieth century, women increasingly asked for clarification about their role in healing ordinances and blessings. Women asked for permission to continue giving blessings from their church leadership. By 1914 any mention of women holding the priesthood had been shut down. “By 1915 the shift away from midwifery had been noticed by Latter-day Saint women” (Alderks). Women mourned this change, partially because they had previously been set apart and ordained as midwives thus giving them organizational authority over women’s healing practices. The practice of women participating in healing rituals disappeared as the medical profession gained public respect, midwives were used less, and the tenants of Mormonism became codified. By the 1940s women were no longer giving blessings with either leadership permission or public acceptance.

The next generation of women in the Mormon Church were largely unaware of their own history and through silence these stories and blessings disappeared from the rhetoric of Relief Society and the Mormon Church as a whole. Ending the healing power of women left a psychological hole in how women viewed themselves and their authority to take care of themselves and others. Women no longer claimed the power to heal each other. How women used rhetoric in healing blessings throughout the nineteenth century remains critical but overlooked.

When women's health began to be addressed more formally by a professional medical community women's issues were named, problematized, and analyzed by those outside of the circle of understanding. By using powerful rhetoric through giving each other blessings women gained a new power that must have, at times, felt like it was slipping culturally from their hands. As healing power and authority was taken from women, female healers were as damaged by the loss of healing rhetoric as those who were no longer able to be healed.

Mormon women were able to bless and heal one another through washing, anointing, blessing, and sealing throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. Women slowly lost their ability to perform this ordinance as they asked for permission from a male-centric leadership structure. By establishing a baseline rhetoric of nineteenth-century Mormon women's healing rituals, scholars can continue watching for ways that rhetorical language changes in an ongoing investigation of patriarchal leadership and women's studies.

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